

THE EMMAUS SERIES

2nd Sunday of Advent, Year B

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

2 Peter 3:8-14

Mark 1:1-8

Prepare a way for the Lord

As we prepare to celebrate the Lord's 'coming' at Christmas, our Advent liturgies invite us to a fuller appreciation of the great plan of God – a plan that will reach its climax with the inauguration of God's final Kingdom, in the 'second coming' of the Saviour.

We read again from the final chapters of the Book of Isaiah. This amazing passage helps us to understand the wonder and joy with which the apostolic generation read the texts of the Old Testament, and recognised that they had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Their faith in Christ, they proclaimed, was 'according to the Scriptures' (Lk 24:27; 1 Cor 15:4 etc.) In this passage, the message of God's generous ways already finds a sublime and inspiring expression: 'Console my people, console them, speak to their hearts'; let the 'joyful messenger' proclaim God's presence in their midst; God will lead the exiled people home through the wilderness, in a new Exodus; Israel's God will be 'like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering the lambs in his arms'.

This Old Testament text provides the background for the gospel reading, which is the opening passage of Mark's gospel – 'the beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ the Son of God'. It is echoed by Mark, in his quotation from 'the book of the prophet Isaiah' (His quotation, in fact, combines two other Old Testament texts with the words from Isaiah). John the Baptist appears as the 'messenger' foretold. He 'prepares a way' for the Saviour, who – in his Paschal Mystery – will lead God's people in the final Exodus of God's great plan. He will prove himself a 'Good Shepherd' to a people 'harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd' (Mt 9:36). Mark's description of the Baptist – wearing 'a garment of camel skin' and living on 'locusts and wild honey' – presents him as another Elijah: the old prophet whose witness to the unique divinity of the God of Israel made him a legendary model of the prophet's role. John's 'baptism of repentance' prepared for the coming of the Saviour; and all generations of Christians have been inspired by his humble 'Advent' witness to the one would 'baptise with the Holy Spirit' – 'I am not fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals'.

2 Peter, from which our other reading comes – with its reference to the 'Second Coming' of the Saviour – is one of the last texts of the New Testament to be written. It reflects the mood of the early Church, as it comes to terms with the fact that they faced an indefinite wait before the Lord's promised return. Like them we must bow before the mystery of God's ways, maintaining an alert faith in the certain, but unknowable, final return of the Saviour. If we must look forward to our familiar world coming to an end – as foretold in the dramatic imagery of the prophets – we should not be frightened, because creation will be transformed in a 'new heaven and new earth', in which all the things we hold dear will be filled with the 'righteousness', or incomparable goodness, of God's ways.

John Thornhill sm